

## The Middle School Philosophy: Do We Practice What We Preach Or Do We Preach Something Different?

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*This quantitative study examined the beliefs of middle grades education faculty from universities across the United States about the purpose of education. The results of a survey of 144 respondents who identified themselves as university faculty that taught middle level courses as a specialty will be discussed. The survey included 23 statements, representing four philosophical orientations: progressivism, essentialism, perennialism, and social reconstructionism. The results of the survey were compared to the central tenets of the middle school philosophy. The findings indicate that of the study participants who prepare middle grades teachers, the majority do believe in ideas that align with key components of the middle school concept.*

Since the mid-20th century, a movement known as the middle school concept, has greatly influenced the education of middle grades students across the United States. With the growth of the standardized testing and accountability movement, the middle school movement appears to be losing some momentum (Beane & Lipka, 2006; George, 2007; Huss & Eastep, 2011). One key component in the strength of this movement has been the advocacy of university educators who prepare teachers and administrators who work with early adolescents. Do the teacher educators at the university level still believe strongly in the middle school concept? The purpose of this study is to determine if faculty of middle grades education at the university level have beliefs about the purpose of education that align with the philosophy underlying the middle school concept.

### **History of Middle School Philosophy**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, students were typically educated in an 8-4 arrangement: eight years of elementary school and four years of high school. Recognition that early adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14 require special educational practices that meet their unique developmental needs began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the junior high was created. The main purpose of this new junior high school was to prepare students for high school and serve as a transition from elementary school to high school. Students were put on two tracks, one designed for college bound students and one that provided vocational training. Early advocates of the junior high saw the needs of students at this age level as different from both elementary-aged children and high school adolescents. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the common grade span configuration was elementary school for six years (grades 1-6), junior high school for three years (grades 7-9 and sometimes 7-8) and high school was three years (grades 10-12 and sometimes 9-12) (Manning, 2000).

During the 1950s and 1960s dissatisfaction with the way that subject-centered junior high schools were meeting the needs of early adolescents led to the formation of the middle school concept, also referred to as middle school philosophy. William Alexander paved the way for what became known as the middle school philosophy when he spoke at the Junior High School Conference in 1963 about the characteristics needed in schools in the middle if they are to meet the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents at that age (Alexander, 1963). During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a reform effort known as the middle school movement ensued and thousands of school systems across the country reconfigured their junior highs into middle schools, usually serving grades 6-8 (George & Alexander, 2003; Manning, 2000; Powell, 2011).

There are generally agreed upon characteristics of schools that follow the middle school philosophy. A school with this philosophy is likely to have interdisciplinary teams of teachers who share a set of students and plan instruction together. The school will have a focus on all aspects of the student (not just academic) and will have a guidance program, which includes teachers as advisors. The curriculum will include an exploratory program and will have programs to develop the health and wellness of young adolescents. A variety of active learning instructional methodologies appropriate for the age group will be utilized. Shared decision making involves everyone, and parents and the community are encouraged to be actively involved in the school (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; AMLE, 2012; George & Alexander, 2003; Smith & McEwin, 2011).

### **Roots of Middle School Philosophy**

Paul George, an influential leader in the middle school movement argues that the middle school concept is a "cauldron of ideas" (Smith & McEwin, 2011, p. 350). Early leaders of the

movement such as William Alexander were progressive educators who identified with progressives such as William Kilpatrick and John Dewey. The foundations of the movement were based on what we know about the needs of early adolescents, and putting the student in the center (Smith & McEwin, 2011).

This “cauldron of ideas” (Smith & McEwin, 2011, p. 350) became more and more formalized throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2012, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) published their most recent position paper which included what they believe should be four essential attributes for successful schools for young adolescents:

1. Developmentally Responsive - using the nature of young adolescents as the foundation on which all decisions are made.
2. Challenging - recognizing that every student can learn and that everyone is held to high expectations.
3. Empowering - providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take control of their lives.
4. Equitable - advocating for every student’s right to learn and providing challenging and relevant learning opportunities. (AMLE, 2012, p. xii)

These four attributes find their philosophical roots in progressivism and ideologies such as democratic education and learner-centered education.

### **Progressivism**

According to John Lounsbury quoted in Smith and McEwin (2011), “The middle school is the rebirth of progressive education... because progressive education like middle level education is based exclusively on what do we know about kids and what do we know about learning and what is the nature of our society” (p. 35). Many leaders in the middle school movement, such as John Arnold, James Beane, Thomas Dickinson, Nancy Doda, and Paul George, have agreed with Lounsbury that the movement is grounded in progressive education (George, 2011; Smith & McEwin, 2011).

At the core of progressive philosophy is the idea that the adolescent is the center of the learning process, not the subject matter or the teacher. Progressives believe schools should provide for the developmental needs of the learner and consider all aspects of the learner - mental physical, emotional, social, etc. (Oliva, 2009). A second key element of progressivism is the notion of active learning where students should acquire new knowledge through experience, collaboration, problem-solving, and inquiry (Dewey, 1897; Schiro, 2008). A third key element of progressivism is the idea of collaborative learning and shared decision-making through democratic education (Apple & Beane, 2007).

The next three sections expand on each of these ideas: learner-centered education, active learning, and democratic education and how they align with middle school philosophy.

### **Learner-Centered Ideology**

In her reflection on the beginnings of the middle school philosophy, Nancy Doda, as quoted in Smith and McEwin (2011), argues that the early pioneers of the middle school movement were “desperate to create schools in which whole human beings could be celebrated and valued, that children would be honored as human beings as well as students” (Smith & McEwin, 2011, p. 187). At the heart of learner-centered ideology is the belief that a student comes to the classroom with innate natures, talents, experiences, perspectives, and desires that are unique to his or her own intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development. It

is the role of educators to focus on the needs and concerns of the adolescent and utilize the best available information about learning and pedagogical methodology to draw out the inherent capabilities of the student to realize individual growth. “The needs and interests of learners, rather than those of teachers, principals, school subjects, parents, or politicians, determine the school program” (Schiro, 2008, p. 93). Learner-centered instruction is ultimately a humanistic approach that fosters facilitative teacher-student relationships to enable students to reach their full potential. These relationships are characterized by caring, flexibility, and empathy (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Noddings, 2007; Schiro, 2008).

Learner-centered beliefs align with middle school philosophy and are at the core of what advocates for the middle school concept have promoted. The middle school should not be subject-centered and should respond to the developmental needs that are unique to the early adolescent. The first essential attribute that AMLE promotes for the education of young adolescents is that it will be “developmentally responsive using the nature of young adolescents as the foundation on which all decisions are made” (AMLE, 2012, p.xii).

### **Active Learning**

Dewey (1897) was a forceful advocate of changing the view of learning from passively receiving knowledge from teachers to the view that learning proceeds from activity. Advocates for active learning agree that learning comes through direct experience and interaction with the physical, intellectual and social environments. Progressives view teachers more as facilitators of learning and promote the use of pedagogical methods such as experiential learning, problem-solving, inquiry, interdisciplinary projects or units, and other group process activities (Guttek, 2004; Oliva, 2009; Schiro, 2008).

Active learning is fundamental to meeting the needs of early adolescents and methodologies that involve actively constructing new knowledge through problem-solving and inquiry have long been advocated by leaders in the middle school movement. Early adolescents are peer-oriented and using group learning and Vygotsky’s notion of socially-constructed learning is a significant aspect of classrooms that are aligned with the middle school concept. Finally, one of the hallmarks of the middle school concept is the notion of interdisciplinary learning. Middle school teachers are typically arranged on interdisciplinary teams so that they can plan projects and units of study for students that integrate a variety of content areas around a central theme that is of interest to the learners (AMLE, 2012).

### **Democratic Education**

Progressives have an abiding faith in democracy and see schooling as a fundamental part of a free and democratic society (Guttek, 2004; Oliva, 2009). James Beane, as quoted in Smith and McEwin (2011) claims, “If I were to explain my work in the middle school movement, it wouldn’t be about trying to find a way to integrate subject areas, it would be about a search for democratic curriculum and a curriculum with a social conscience” (Smith & McEwin, 2011, p. 350). The theme of democratic schooling can be seen throughout many writings about the middle school philosophy.

Democratic education advocates fostering the democratic values and skills that students will need to be active participants in the larger democracy. Democratic values such as the open flow of ideas, the rights of all to participate in decision-making, a concern for the common good, as well as a concern for individual rights, a respect for human dignity, equity, and freedom, and all

enveloped in a sense of social responsibility should be instilled in early adolescents while they are in school. But in order to participate in a democratic society, students will need skills like the ability to analyze social and political issues, to collaborate, to think critically, and to use critical reflection and analysis to solve problems. To accomplish this, teachers should use curriculum that incorporates exploring and solving authentic problems and issues through integrative unit themes, discussion and debate, service learning, and in-depth projects. This would happen within school and classroom structures that allow for participatory decision-making by teams of administrators, teachers, staff, and students. Equity would be encouraged through structures such as heterogeneous grouping and a common core curriculum. Finally parents and the community would be encouraged to participate in the democratic education process (Apple & Beane, 2007; Beane, 2013; Dewey, 1903).

These ideas of democratic education are promoted throughout the literature about middle school philosophy. The ideals advocated by Apple, Beane, Dewey and others who support democratic education can clearly be seen in two of the four essential attributes of young adolescent education proposed by AMLE: (a) education will be “empowering [by] providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take control of their lives,” and (b) education will be “equitable [by] advocating for every student’s right to learn and providing challenging and relevant learning opportunities” (AMLE, 2012, p. xii). The AMLE position paper further goes on to specifically advocate for parent and community involvement in the schools (AMLE, 2012).

### Method

As noted previously, the purpose of this study was to determine if the middle school concept, as defined through theory and/or practice, is manifested in reality, or practice, both or neither by university faculty in middle level education. In order to accomplish this, an instrument that *has* been used for multiple purposes based on the work of Gutek (2004), *Philosophical and Ideological Voices in Education*, was constructed to help define belief systems. The instrument, designed by Page and Kemp (2013), utilized the basic educational philosophies of essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, and postmodernism/social reconstructionism to create a survey that addressed the fundamental tenets of each educational belief system. The instrument was composed of a series of statements related to the aforementioned educational philosophies. The specific number of statements can be found in Table 1.

The statements were all worded in the affirmative with responses given on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 6 being “Strongly Agree.” Each statement, with the exception of the last, was focused on issues related to the purpose of public education. A sample statement reads, “The purpose of education is to help students develop the basic skills necessary to be successful in life.” As noted previously, there was one additional statement added for further information:

- Standardized testing is a viable means of judging the quality of an education.

Furthermore, there were a variety of demographic items that were used in other analyses. All of this information was self-reported. For this study, the demographic “Subject(s) taught” was utilized to extract faculty related to middle level education.

**Table 1**  
**Breakdown of Statements**

Educational Philosophy	Number of Statements
Essentialism	5
Perennialism	6
Progressivism	6
Social Reconstructionism	6

### Validity and Reliability

The instrument was created by two curriculum theorists, Page and Kemp (2013), using as noted above, Gutek (2004) as a model. While there are many sources of information about education belief systems, this was deemed a good choice because of the stature of Gutek. In addition, the instrument was vetted by an additional curriculum theorist for the variety of topics and by two outside readers for clarity, *singularity* and diversity. This evaluation of the instrument allowed for basic content validity and safeguarded the quality of the statements. In order to ensure that the instrument had validity beyond content validity, convergent validity and discriminant validity was also determined. After careful analysis, it was determined that the instrument had both convergent and discriminant validity after a correlational analysis of statements in the survey reveals appropriate relationships between/among the statements. For a more detailed analysis of the validity and reliability of this instrument, please see Flynn, Kemp, and Page (2013).

An argument could be made that a confirmatory factor analysis would have been a more appropriate analytical procedure to determine *the* validity of the instrument. However, because the instrument was not designed to confirm any particular construct, a confirmatory factor analysis would not be suitable.

Overall, this was the fifth use of this instrument and data set. Based on previous analysis, this survey had good internal *consistency*, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .855. This is above the preferred .8 as suggested by Pallant (2007).

### Respondents

In order to ensure that there was a diverse sample of faculty for this study, respondents were chosen using the *U.S. News and World Report* list of top colleges and universities. A random sample of 50 of the top 200 national universities and a random sample of 50 of the top 200 liberal arts colleges were selected. In addition, 43 other institutions (based on convenience and contacts) were also added for a total of 143 universities. A total of 5,008 surveys were sent out over the course of 14 days (due to mail server limitations). A link was sent to the selected faculty members with instructions explaining the study, reliability statistics, and a statement explaining that by completing the survey, consent for use was being granted.

### Procedure

Email addresses were manually entered from each university’s college of education website and compiled into a master list. Of the 5,008 surveys that were sent out, 142 were returned for one

of the following reasons: (a) bad email address, (b) sent to spam, and (c) faculty member on sabbatical leave. In addition, seven faculty refused to answer the survey for a variety of reasons like questioning survey research, disagreement with the content of the survey, and no interest. In all, there were a total of 752 respondents for a 15% response rate. In a meta-analysis of survey response rates Nulty (2008), summarized that under the most stringent conditions (defined as a 3% sampling error and a 95% confidence level—common measurements) the results should be 25% for a population of 2000 (for a more comprehensive explanation, see Flynn, Kemp, & Page, 2013). In this case, the total number of respondents was 5008. Therefore, an argument could be made that the 150% increase in the number of respondents would reduce the response rate to the 15% found in this study. What is more important is if the respondents are representative of the group. As noted previously, this was sent to the top 50 national universities, the top 50 liberal arts colleges and 43 other random universities. There was equal representation for all regions and university types. For this study, there were a total of 144 respondents who identified themselves as university faculty that taught middle level courses as a specialty.

### Data Analysis

In order to most clearly delineate the beliefs of faculty of middle level education, a two-part analysis was conducted. First, a simple descriptive analysis of the results of the survey was completed to determine the ideologies that faculty of middle level education put on the top of the list. The analysis allowed for a general view of where the strongest beliefs were found. Second, a factor analysis was conducted in order to try to more clearly define the belief systems of these same faculty.

### Results and Discussion

**Descriptive analysis.** The first analysis, a descriptive look at the data (see Table 2, pg. 17) reveal that faculty of middle school education favor issues such as the following:

- The active construction of knowledge is a primary purpose of public education.
- One main purpose of public education is to develop well-rounded individuals.
- Being able to use multiple sources of information to make decisions is a main goal of public education.
- One main purpose of public education is to promote social equality in society.
- One primary purpose of public education is to help students develop the basic skills necessary to be successful in life.
- A main purpose of public education is to create productive citizens.
- Cultivating in students an awareness for creating their own destiny is a primary purpose of public education.
- One main purpose for public education is to instill in students that their choices are not determined by their environment.

A quick look at the results of **this** survey reveals that the philosophies of middle level education faculty almost completely mirror the belief statement, *This We Believe* (AMLE, 2012). The major exception is the lack of mention of a developmentally responsive curriculum. However, this omission is more due to this being an education-based psychological construct rather than a philosophical belief system. Otherwise, it is clear that the beliefs of middle school education

faculty do align with the middle school concepts as defined by the Association for Middle Level Education.

What this suggests is that, at least in this sample, faculty of middle grades education believe that the focus of public education at the middle grades level is less about basic skills and preparing students for jobs, but more on developing well-rounded individuals and social development. While they believe schools should develop basic skills and prepare students to think critically about information to make decisions, they place a high emphasis on the development of the whole young adolescent, not just cognitive development.

- Of the six items with a mean above 5.0, four of the items stand out as central tenets of the middle school philosophy:
- The active construction of knowledge is a primary purpose of public education.
- One main purpose of public education is to develop well-rounded individuals.
- One main purpose of public education is to promote social equality in society.
- One main purpose of public education is to promote the well-being of all individuals.

The other two items are not in opposition to the middle school concept but would not necessarily be considered central principles of middle school philosophy. It appears that, in general, teacher educators who prepare middle grades teachers do indeed agree in principle with many of the basic ideas underlying middle school philosophy.

**Factor analysis.** As mentioned previously, the second part of this analysis focused on factor analysis. The items in the Purpose of Public Education survey were subjected to a principal components analysis (PCA) using SPSS version 21. Prior to performing the analysis, the correlation matrix was assessed for suitability of data for a factor analysis. An examination of the correlation matrix showed the presence of many coefficients above .3, with a substantial number being above .4. Because of the strength of the correlations, the absolute value was set for .5 instead of a more standard .4. The Kaiser-Meyer-Okin value was .816, exceeding the recommended value of .6 (Pallant, 2009 citing Kaiser, 1970, 1974), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance.

Principal components analysis revealed six components with eigenvalues exceeding one explaining 63% of the overall variance. An inspection of the scree plot revealed a clear break after the second component. This was further supported by the results of a Parallel Analysis using a Monte Carlo PCA program (Watkins, 2000) that revealed that there were only two components with eigenvalues that exceeded the related criterion values from a randomly created matrix of the same size as this sample (25 questions and 142 respondents).

The two component solution explained 42% of the total variance with component one explaining 26% and component 2, 16%. To aid in the interpretation of this factor analysis, an Oblimin rotation was conducted. The rotated solution revealed two distinct (correlation of .164 between components) components with strong loadings on each individual variable within the structure of each component. The pattern matrix (Table 3) can be found at the end of this section. Interestingly, the factor analysis reveals a significant secondary belief system.

A quick look at Table 3 reveals that the most significant factor (explaining 26% of the variance) is fundamentally the middle school concept. Therefore, this factor will be named the Middle Level Mindset. With the exception of focusing on basic skills

**Table 2**  
**Faculty of Middle Grades Education Descriptive Statistics**

TWB		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Chlg	The active construction of knowledge is a primary purpose of public education.	144	1	6	5.34	.955
	One main purpose of public education is to develop well-rounded individuals.	144	1	6	5.31	.796
Chlg	Being able to use multiple sources of information to make decisions is a main goal of public education.	144	1	6	5.27	.933
Equit	One main purpose of public education is to promote social equality in society.	144	1	6	5.26	.916
	One primary purpose of public education is to help students develop the basic skills necessary to be successful in life.	143	3	6	5.21	.812
	One main purpose of public education is to promote the well-being of all individuals.	143	1	6	5.08	1.082
Chlg	A main purpose of public education is to create productive citizens.	144	1	6	4.86	1.049
Emp	Cultivating in students an awareness for creating their own destiny is a primary purpose of public education.	143	1	6	4.86	.924
Emp	One main purpose for public education is to instill in students that their choices are not determined by their environment.	142	1	6	4.85	1.006
	Developing responsibility is a primary reason for public education.	143	1	6	4.83	.988
Emp	One primary reason for public education is to foster the uniqueness of each individual student.	144	1	6	4.79	.996
	Being able to work with others is one of the main purposes of public education.	144	1	6	4.76	1.026
	Completing a teacher preparation program is essential to becoming a successful teacher.	144	1	6	4.67	1.337
	A primary purpose of public education is to teach that a person's traditional role in society is not a determining factor in future success.	140	1	6	4.61	1.029
	Getting a job and/or going to college is one main reason for public education.	144	1	6	4.53	1.206
	Promoting future economic success is one of the main reasons that we have public education.	144	1	6	4.29	1.146
	Developing morality is a prime purpose of public education.	142	1	6	3.99	1.241
	Being critical of social norms is a primary purpose of public education.	144	1	6	3.91	1.211
	One main purpose of public education is to promote the American Dream.	144	1	6	3.85	1.263
	A main reason for public education is to expose the conditions of domination present in society.	142	1	6	3.80	1.402
	Promoting the continuance of the cultural values of the United States is one of the main reasons for having a public education system.	144	1	6	3.78	1.323
	A primary purpose of public education is to teach the content that is traditionally taught in schools.	142	1	6	3.75	1.355
	One of the main reasons for public education is to help teach students to fit into society.	144	1	6	3.53	1.188
	Fostering patriotism is a primary purpose of public education.	143	1	6	3.23	1.304
	Standardized testing is a viable means of determining the quality of a student.	144	1	6	2.11	1.212
	Valid N (listwise)	132				

Key: TWB=This We Believe; DR=Developmentally Responsible; Chlg=Challenging; Emp=Empowering; Equit=Equitable

(which probably emanated from standardized testing), the statements that make up Factor 1 are all related to the aforementioned *This We Believe* statement. This reinforces the previous findings from the descriptive data. It is the secondary factor that merits further discussion. The second factor, which we will call Democratic Education, and accounts for 16% of the variance, is entirely distinct from the *This We Believe* statement.

The second factor focuses on issues dealing with belief in the American Dream. Hochschild (2001) defines the American Dream as, "...the promise that all who live in the United States have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they understand it (material or otherwise)" (p. 35). In order to realize this dream, the students need to be taught how to fit into society, patriotism, morality, and the replication of cultural values. This Democratic Education factor is strongly reflected in the Progressive notion of education for democracy. This factor is almost entirely focused on American culture and the tenets of American democracy. While not reflected in the current *This We Believe* statement, this harkens back to the original intent of progressive education, particularly in reference to Americanism and civic education.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that not only do current middle level teacher educators fundamentally believe in the Middle School Concept, but their beliefs also reflect the foundations of progressive education on which the Middle School Concept was built.

### Limitations and Future Research

One of the major limitations of this study is that the survey instrument was not specifically designed to measure middle grade teacher educators' beliefs about middle school philosophy. The instrument that was utilized was designed to determine the general philosophical views of professors and instructors in colleges of education. However, due to the demographic information obtained with the surveys the middle grades teacher educators' responses were easy to identify and analyze.

One possibility for further the research is to conduct a qualitative study of university middle grades faculty in colleges of education to obtain a deeper understanding of their educational philosophies and beliefs about the middle school concept. A study that could provide valuable insight would also be one that focuses on school and district administrators to discover their beliefs about the middle school concept and also research the reasons that it is not employed as designed. Another possible study could research the beliefs of parents, politicians, and state-level education administrators and see what they believe the curriculum of the middle grades should be focused on.

### Conclusion

There is no question that the middle school movement, based on what has been referred to as the middle school concept or middle school philosophy has had a profound impact in how

**Table 3**  
**Pattern Matrix**

	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
One main purpose of public education is to promote the American Dream.		.604
Promoting the continuance of the cultural values of the United States is one of the main reasons for having a public education system.		.847
One of the main reasons for public education is to help teach students to fit into society.		.758
<i>Cultivating in students an awareness for creating their own destiny is a primary purpose of public education.</i>	.507	
<i>One primary reason for public education is to foster the uniqueness of each individual student.</i>	.506	
<i>The active construction of knowledge is a primary purpose of public education.</i>	.727	
<i>Being able to use multiple sources of information to make decisions is a main goal of public education.</i>	.757	
<b><i>One primary purpose of public education is to help students develop the basic skills necessary to be successful in life.</i></b>	<b>.643</b>	
Developing morality is a prime purpose of public education.		.622
Fostering patriotism is a primary purpose of public education.		.785

schools are structured and early adolescents are taught in the middle grades. There have been many advocates of middle school philosophy ranging from classroom teachers and school administrators to university faculty. Early leaders and pioneers of the middle school philosophy were mostly faculty from schools of education in universities across the United States. The results of this study indicate that the middle grades faculty who responded to this survey still believe strongly in the key principles underlying the middle school concept.

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